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ABSTRACT

A study investigated access to books for children in schools that described their literacy curriculum as "literature-based." Six schools that served economically disadvantaged children exhibited a wide variation in the number of books available in both school libraries and classrooms. Two of the schools depict the influences on children's access to books. George Washington Elementary School is a large, urban school where almost all of the 700 students are from minority families that have incomes below the federal poverty standards. Playfield Elementary sits 50 miles west in a rural community and enrolls approximately 300 children, most of whom are white, and 70% of whom are from economically disadvantaged families. The library at Washington Elementary has only about 10 books per child, very few recently published reference materials, and virtually no computers for student use. The library at Playfield Elementary has about 20 volumes per child, many new books, and a variety of computers and other technological support. Classroom libraries at the two schools showed a similar disparity. Findings suggest the need for the following supportive conditions: (1) children need a plentiful supply of books, a variety of books, and time to read in school; (2) teachers need financial support for book purchases, curricular support for the use of books, and support through professional development; (3) children and teachers need support from the library; and (4) teachers need to use all that is available. (Contains 15 references.) (RS)

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Access? Books, Children, and Literature-Based Curriculum in Schools

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Access?: Books, Children, and Literature-Based Curriculum in Schools

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Almost all educators would agree that in order for children to learn to read from a literature-based reading program they must have access to books. While this assumption may seem simplistic and almost universally agreed upon, we have found, through our work at the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, that economically disadvantaged children simply do not have access to many books in school. Many of these children come from homes where the purchase of books and trips to the library rarely occur because of limitations on the family's budgets of money and time. Ideally, book-rich schools could work to equalize the opportunity for children of poverty to become life-long readers by providing them with at least as much access to books as their more economically advantaged peers. We believe that it is important to explore issues concerning access to books for all children and especially children from economically disadvantaged schools and districts.

Background

We have spent two years working in six elementary schools that describe their literacy curriculum as "literature-based." One of the first things we noticed was the lack of books in these schools. We decided to investigate the accessibility of books in these schools serving high concentrations of economically disadvantaged children in several ways: through classroom observations, teacher and administrator interviews, and examination of various school documents. We interviewed 54 teachers concerning their use of books, observed many of their classrooms, and counted the number of books in their classroom collections. We interviewed school administrators, covering a variety of topics including school budgets for reading materials. We analyzed public records of school library acquisitions and collection numbers.

We found a wide variation in the sheer number of books available in both school libraries and classrooms. Children's access to books varied among teachers within schools and among

schools. We found a wide variation in the manner in which books were accessible to children. By this we mean the easy accessibility of culturally relevant, independently readable, and interesting books that children choose to read and are given ample time to read. We found that children often had few opportunities for uninterrupted reading and little access to books that they could manage to read independently or were culturally relevant to their experiences. We discovered that school and district policies, both formal and informal, affect children's access to books. There were a number of factors that influenced access to books, including policies concerning staffing and use of libraries, curricular mandates, and the purchasing of books.

Two Scenarios

In order to depict the influences on children's access to books we offer snapshots of two elementary schools from our study. These schools are similar in that their curricular plans for reading instruction include the use of a literature-based reading series, and both schools' student populations include a majority of children of poverty (defined by the number of children receiving free or reduced-priced lunches). There are, however, vast differences in the both the number of books available for children and the manner in which children are encouraged to read.

George Washington Elementary School is a large, urban school where almost all of the 700 students are from minority families that have incomes below the federal poverty standards. Playfield Elementary sits fifty miles west in a rural community and enrolls approximately 300 children, mostly white children, 70% of whom are from economically disadvantaged families.

The library at Washington Elementary is located on the third floor of the school building and is furnished with scratched wooden tables and chairs sitting on an ancient green linoleum floor. The ceiling is high and the room is dimly lit. As we wander among the half-empty shelves, we find that the majority of the books were published before 1970 and feature stories about white, middle-class children and outdated science and social studies concepts (i.e., books about the Soviet Union). Many of the books at Washington Elementary have been rebound in single-color bindings. There are few book displays. In fact, the library at Washington Elementary has only about 10 volumes per child, very few recently published reference materials, and virtually no computers for student use (no more than one per classroom, if at all). When children make their weekly, half-hour visit to the library, they are seated and given worksheets to complete. After they complete these worksheets, children are allowed to browse the shelves and to select a single book to be checked out for school use only. Children at Washington Elementary are not allowed to take books out of the building.

The library at Playfield Elementary is located on the second floor of the school building. It is brightly lit, carpeted, and furnished with colored tables and chairs varying in size. There are some book displays that feature award-winning books, new books, books that represent a range of ethnic and cultural groups and perspectives, and books covering themes of interest. Most of the shelves for books are waist high, from an adult's perspective, and most of the picture books are placed on low shelves so that younger children may have eye-level access to the books. There are many new books with the original, eye-catching covers shelved throughout the library. In addition, the Playfield library has computers and other technological support such as televisions, video cameras, and VCRs. Playfield Elementary library has approximately twice the number of books as Washington Elementary, 20 volumes per child. The Playfield Elementary library also operates on scheduled periods. However, children from Playfield Elementary can visit the library twice weekly for 30 minutes, once for skills lessons and story readings and once for browsing and book swaps. There are no limits on the number of books children can check out and take home.

If we wander the classrooms at these two elementary schools, we note similar substantial differences in the sizes of classroom libraries and the display of books. At Washington Elementary, few classroom libraries have even 100 books. For example, Ms. Brook's room, one of the more innovative first grades, has a classroom library consisting of one set of Storybox (1992) books purchased by the school district, a shelf of old basal stories, some tattered children's magazines, a display of four or five big books, 25 copies of ten different tradebooks that are part of the literature-based series, and a box of children's books kept behind her desk. However, we observed few teachers actually using the tradebooks accompanying the reading series in their classrooms. Many teachers reported that these books were simply too difficult for most of the children to independently read and, in many cases, culturally and ethnically inappropriate.

Teachers at Washington, like Ms. Brook, acknowledge that although they have each had ten-and-one-half hours of staff development covering literature-based instruction, they have had little instruction in using children's literature and have little money with which to buy children's books; for example, teachers were allotted $160.00 to purchase all classroom supplies, including books, for the 1992-1993 school year. This means that if a teacher at Washington has 25 students, he/she is given $6.40 per child for the school year. Teachers at Washington further bemoan the fact that they have little time in which to share stories or have children read independently because they are required complete the stories, activities, and workbooks in their literature-based series in sequence. Children at Washington Elementary spend much more time involved in pre-

reading and post-reading skills-mastery activities than they do actually reading stories.

In contrast, a classroom library at Playfield Elementary has a range of 300-400 books. For example, Ms. Cook, a second grade teacher at Playfield Elementary, has collected over 300 books for her children. She, like Ms. Brook, has spent her own money for many of her books, but has also been encouraged to order books that she needs. Although Ms. Cook estimates that for the 1992-1993 school year she spent around $300.00 provided by the school, she was not told exactly how much she could spend. Her school district has provided her with several Storybox (1992) sets and other sets of easy, predictable books to supplement her books for independent reading. Ms. Cook has a large collection of picture books, easy novels, and about a dozen big books shelved in a corner of her room. She has placed cushioned, fold-out chairs and bean bag chairs in this area to entice her students to read. She displays books from the library based on social studies and science themes, reads those books aloud, and encourages children to reread them. Ms. Cook and her colleagues believe that although they have a good, working knowledge of children's books and frequently share books among themselves, they would like to know more about children's literature. Ms. Cook and her colleagues also teach under a curriculum plan based on a literature-based reading series. However, they are encouraged to use the materials of the reading series flexibly. Ms. Cook describes her use of the reading series as "dipping into it" regularly. Consequently, perhaps, we are much more likely to see children reading at Playfield Elementary. Children in Ms. Cook's class spend a large block of time independently reading books of their choice and responding to those books through formal and informal book discussions among themselves, conferences with their teacher, a variety of writing activities, drama, and art. The lessons from the literature anthology are usually brief and focused on reading and responding to the stories. Little of the time is spent on skills-mastery activities or materials that accompany the series.

Of the six schools in our study, Washington Elementary and Playfield Elementary represent contrasting examples of the range of conditions for access to books in the schools we studied. We were struck by the differences between these two schools that serve high numbers of children of poverty. We wondered what specifically made children's access to books in these schools so different. Both schools have similar curricular plans. Both schools serve many children from economically disadvantaged families. Both schools have limited financial resources. We realize that federal, state, and local education budgets are increasingly pinched. However, we believe schools and districts erect barriers to access to literature. In the following passages, we offer some insights from our study with recommendations for considering access to

books for children.

Recommendations

We believe that school access to books is affected by what children are allowed to do with books, what teachers are allowed to do with books, and how administrators support literature-based instruction. We believe that children learn to read from reading and that they are more likely to read if they are reading books they enjoy and have selected for themselves. In order to ensure that this may likely occur, we recommend the following supportive conditions:

1. Children need a plentiful supply of books
2. Children need a variety of books
3. Children need time to read in school
4. Teachers need financial support for book purchases
5. Teachers need curricular support for the use of books
6. Teachers need support through professional development
7. Children and teachers need support from the library
8. Teachers need to use all that is available

1. Children need a plentiful supply of books

There is evidence indicating that sheer availability of books increases the likelihood of people engaging in reading; this relationship has been demonstrated through the use of "book floods" which substantially increase the numbers of books available to teachers (Elly & Mungubhai, 1983). Further, the American Library Association recommended, in 1975, that school libraries need a minimum of 20 books per child (Hack, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987). We found that only two of the six schools in our study meet this minimum standard. While useful, these standards were developed in 1975, an era in which reading tradebooks was generally assigned to recreational reading, and there was relatively little of this in classrooms (Allington, 1977).

In literature-based classrooms, such as the ones we studied, children read far more than in traditional skills-based classrooms, two to three times as much material on the average (Hiebert & Colt, 1989; Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989; Walmsley, Feilding, & Walp, 1991). Therefore, we agree with Hack, Hepler, and Hickman (1993) in recommending that classroom libraries need at least 300 titles, single and multiple copies, as part of a permanent collection, with supplements from a well-stocked school library. Very few of the 54 classrooms in our study had this many books. Teachers often relied upon school and community libraries to supplement their meager

collections. Building classroom libraries from school and public libraries has its problems. Books must, at some time, be returned. Young children benefit greatly from the opportunity to revisit favorite books through repeated readings as well as the opportunity to explore new and different books within and outside of their classrooms. In short, we are frankly suggesting that schools and classrooms, especially those serving large concentrations of economically disadvantaged children, need many, many books.

2. Children need a variety of books

Even though an adequate supply of books might be available, we found that access to books can be limited in other ways. As adults we are well aware of the fact that not all books are equally interesting and relevant to each person, and not all books are equally easy to read. In each of the six schools we studied, we found children struggling to read books that were well beyond what they could manage independently, and struggling to read books that held little or no interest for them. We also found that children's access to books was often restricted to perspectives selected by the adults in charge of providing books. In any given classroom there are children with a range of reading backgrounds, interests, and abilities. School and classroom libraries need to be balanced: in genre representation, in levels of difficulty, and in perspectives (Hack et al., 1993). Children not only need the opportunity to select books of their choice, but also need to be exposed to the range of language, topics, genres, and perspectives that children's literature offers (Galda, 1989). Children need the opportunity to learn to love books and reading through exploring a diverse range of books; they need books in which they can see themselves and see others.

We also believe that children need, quite simply, to be able to independently read books. This means that classrooms and schools need a range of books of varying difficulty levels.

3. Children need time to read in school

Children should have long, uninterrupted blocks of time to read, to get lost in books (Allington, 1977; Taylor, Frye, & Mayurama, 1990). For many of the children in our study, the sheer lack of time to read further limited their access to books. In many of these classrooms time was chopped into blocks of 20 minutes. Reading time, in many cases, was further divided into teacher-guided reading time, independent reading time, and teacher read-aloud time, with a steady stream of children entering and exiting for special programs. Thus, getting lost in books was virtually impossible for most of the children in these schools. We recommend that teachers carefully consider the actual time children spend reading during reading time. If every school

set a policy of providing teachers with two or three hours of uninterrupted time each day, then real reading may be possible. This is not impossible; however, such scheduling does require planning and coordination (Cunningham & Allington, 1994).

4. Teachers need financial support for book purchases

Forty percent of the teachers in this study reported that they purchased the majority of the books in their classroom collections with personal funds, and many of the teachers regularly brought in boxes of books from the public library, with the risk and real penalty of paying for lost books. How can teachers increase the number of books in their classrooms? There seems to be no easy solution, and in our opinion, it seems desperate to suggest to teachers to go to yard sales, solicit donations from parents and community members, and spend their own money to buy books for their children (strategies many teachers already use). A somewhat simpler way to support teachers financially for book purchases is to allow them some decisions in how already available funds are allocated for materials. We reiterate the suggestions concerning seatwork money by Jachym, Allington, and Broikou (1989): use workbook and photocopying funds for purchasing children's books.

We found that in many cases, teachers have little input in the decisions made concerning the purchase of curricular materials (or instruction) for their students. However, we strongly recommend that teachers be allowed to decide how available monies are spent for children in their classrooms. And we further suggest that substantial portions of these funds be spent on books for children.

5. Teachers need curricular support for the use of books

One of the differences influencing children's access to books among the schools that we studied was the kind of support provided for teachers through curricular mandates. In the state of New York, for example, state textbook funds cannot be used to purchase children's literature unless a curriculum plan incorporating tradebooks has been developed. Only two of the six schools in our study had developed such plans. Another school's district adopted a "core book" curriculum where all children read the same books in the same grade. Much like the effect of adopting a literature anthology, children in this district spent the majority of time reading the core books, which reduced the opportunity for selecting and reading books of their choice. Similarly, money spent on class sets restricted the number of titles available in the classroom. Three schools, including Washington and Playfield, purchased a commercially produced, literature-based curriculum with pupil anthologies and class sets of trade books. However, there

were differences in how district curriculum plans directed the used of these materials. For example, Washington Elementary's use of a mandated pacing chart vastly limited the range of books and activities that teachers introduced to students to those titles and tasks in the reading series. In contrast, Playfield Elementary teachers are given much more flexibility in how they use these materials. This more flexible curricular directive resulted in more opportunities to read more books in some of the classrooms. Thus, we recommend that teachers' use of books for literacy teaching be supported through state and local curricular directives that work to ensure students' access to a variety of books reflecting a range of topics, perspectives, and difficulty levels and provide teachers with more freedom to select both books and activities that seem most appropriate for their students.

6. Teachers need support through professional development

Teachers who participated in our study bemoaned the fact that they not only had few books, but they also needed to know more about children's literature. Most of the teachers reported that they were required or encouraged to attend in-service training in a range of topics related to literature-based instruction, for example, portfolio assessment, writing workshop, use of running records, and integrated language arts instruction. Oddly, from our researcher perspective, these teachers received little or no supportive staff development concerning children's books or their use in classrooms. We believe that more knowledgeable teachers are better able to help match children with appropriate books. We suggest that school districts foster teachers' knowledge about children's literature in three appropriate ways: a) provide teachers with time and support to discuss children's literature among themselves; b) give teachers a greater voice in the selection of topics and structure of professional development days; and c) have schools subscribe to and distribute various journals that feature reviews of children's literature; for example, The Reading Teacher, The Hornbook, and The New Advocate.

7. Children and teachers need support from the library

We found that other school building policies, both formal and informal, also affect children's access to the library. We believe that schools can and should analyze their policies concerning library use, staffing, and funding to determine the effects on children's access to books. Policies that limit children's access should be changed. School libraries should serve the children and community through open access before, during, and after school throughout the year. None of the economically disadvantaged schools that we studied offered such services, usually because funding was not available. In light of the fact that 50% of all California school libraries are now closed, we suggest that funding for school libraries be mandated at state and

local levels to help ensure access for all children. We further suggest that school libraries be considered in a new way: as book-rich environments for the entire community; as places where children get support from well informed teachers to help them select books (McGill-Franzen, 1993); as places where children can have support from parents to help them select books (Strickland & Walmsley, 1992); and as places where children can have support from their peers to help them select books (Guice, 1991).

8. Teachers need to use all that is available

Because they are so very often isolated from their peers, we found that many teachers were unaware of the resources of books available to them in their own schools. For example, we found many of the teachers did not know of books stored in other teachers' classrooms, and we also found that teachers too often hoarded what few books they did have. We believe that frequent exchanges of books among teachers could revitalize children's interest in depleted classroom libraries.

We also found that purchases made at the district level for all teachers really resulted in duplication of materials. For example, we discovered that all first grade teachers at one school had the exact same set of Storybox books. We believe that children's needs would be better served by purchasing and sharing a variety of books.

Finally, we believe that teachers and schools must no longer ignore the texts offered through media other than print. Very soon we will have 500 television channels offering a range of "stories." Perhaps teachers should more seriously consider video and film as modes for the construction of text meaning.

Summary

If our goal is to help children become life-long readers, we should understand that schools not only influence how well children read, but also how much. We need to remember that how much they read is critically influential in determining how well they will read. Those of us who are readers know that to get to that *great* book we will read several not-so-great books. For many economically disadvantaged children, the school is the most likely source of books. If we want children to become readers, providing them with access to lots of wonderful books seems the least that we might do.

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